

Sean Smith

I have worked for the Canadian Pacific Railroad for 29 years. My father worked there for 25 years. My father-in-law worked for Canadian National Railroad for 35 years.

I come from a railroad family, we know of what we speak.

I started working as a baggage handler on the CPR passenger train. I then worked as a Carman, repairing freight cars, cabooses, snowplows, etc. I also performed inspections, and was dispatched to local derailments. I now work as an electrician and work primarily on Locomotives.

I have worked in Winnipeg Weston shops and now work in Calgary Ogden shops.

I have seen a lot.

The one thing I haven't seen is government involvement, that is, until something bad happens.

Well, something bad is happening.

Where to start is the hard part. How far back do you want to go? My feeling, that could of course be disputed, is that it all started with the removal of the Caboose in the 1980's.

The Caboose was a complete railcar. It was occupied by the conductor and a brakeman. It had a purpose. It was at the end of the train for a reason. These people at the end of the train could monitor the air pressure of the train, but more importantly they were a set of eyes.

The Cabooses had, what was called a cupola, built into it. This was a set of seats on top that were occupied when the train was traveling. From here the conductor and brakeman watched the entire train as it traveled down the track. They were able to see if anything was flying off the cars, if anything was leaking from the cars, they could notice a derailment right away before the engineer pulled too much and caused excessive damage. With all of this safety that the Caboose provided, why was it removed?

Money!

The railroads convinced the ignorant government that they no longer needed the Caboose and could replace it with an air gauge monitor.

When the railroads saw how the gullible government fell for this ruse, it opened the flood gates to save cash for the shareholders and put the public at constant risk.

And that they have done.

I will save you time and not cover the entire slow demise of railroad safety through the 1980's and 1990's, but instead, I will inform you of the status as it has become now.

To start with, "contracting out" is the key phrase used by all railroads now. The strategy is that when something is "contracted out" it eliminates a key word that the railroads never want to use, that being "liability".

The problem, though, with "contracting out" maintenance work is that the contractor is not familiar with any Railroad or Canadian Transportation rules. If he is told of these rules, he seldom, if ever follows these rules. Why? Because the Government never follows up on who is doing the work and what kind of work is being done.

If anything bad happens to a train due to contracting out, the railroad claims no liability because the contractor did the work; the contractor is gone and nowhere to be found; and the government does not have a clue what just happened. It's a win, win, win for everybody, except of course for the innocent public who have just had their town destroyed, or their drinking water polluted, or someone killed.

But that's OK, as long as the railroad was not responsible the shareholders will be happy and the public will get over it.

So what happens when the railroad just can't find a contractor to do the work? Well, as it goes now, ... they just don't do it.

I have seen so much work **not** done it is ridiculous. The most ridiculous part though, is that the railroads have went from ten's of thousands of maintenance employees down to a few thousand, and no government agency has asked how they can keep maintaining the now larger fleet, and more miles of track. Does the government think that the railroads use magic, or some sort of mysterious powers? Or do they just turn a blind eye?

Some of the things I have seen in recent months include roller bearings for wheels that were disqualified by a tradesman as scrap, and then are placed in the pile of good bearings to be used again by the Foreman. Gotta save money!

I have seen a crack in a locomotive frame, right above the fuel tank, 20" long and wide enough to stick your fingers in, let go without repair. Gee, you know how much that would cost to fix??

I have seen repairs on car safety appliances (hand holds, ladders, steps, etc.) go from replace when necessary, to minor straightening. It is now policy that you spend no more than 4 hours on an entire car to do safety appliances, you were allowed unlimited time in the past.

I have seen the contracted out management company (Alstom Transport) ignore the specifications used by GM, GE, AAR, CTC, and change the specifications to suite there own use. It's cheaper to change the spec than fix the problem.

I have seen the contracted out management company try to force a journeyman to press two wheels on an axle that were mismatched in size. When the journeyman refused to do this due to repercussions that he may incur should something happen, he was threatened with dismissal. When the contracted out management company finally realized that they could not win, they themselves, contracted the axle and wheels out to Rail Power Inc. who agreed to do it. Is this wheel set traveling around somewhere right now? I hope not where I live.

I have seen them re-qualify welding personnel by just giving the Forman stickers with new dates on them and sticking them right over the old dates on their certificates. Do you know how much a re-certification coarse costs?

They have done the same thing with gauges that have to be re-qualified, they just get a sticker with a new date on it and stick it over the old date.

The latest fiasco that we are enduring is that the contracted out management company, along with CP Rail, has instituted a new composite mechanic. They have taken people in different trades, forced them to work with mechanics for minimal training, and then force them to do maintenance on locomotives and cars on their own. What used to take a 4 year apprenticeship to learn is now learnt in 4 weeks. If this wasn't so dangerous it would be funny. Do you want a pipe fitter that has had 4 weeks of training working on the brakes on your car? Why don't we ask John Q. Public the same question in all of the newspapers and see what the response would be?

This is all I have for now, but I promise you that everyone I work with has a story. Most have many stories. And every one of them has the same question. What is the government doing?

The thinking at the railroad on safety is that it is cheaper to pay for an accident after it happens, then to pay to prevent it. It is up to the government to change that thinking, and if you can't, you will then be the ones who are liable for any damage caused, any eco system destroyed, any people killed.

How do you watch-dog a billion dollar company? Hit them in the only place that counts to them. Start fining them until they notice. But to do that, you have to start taking notice in what they are doing.

It is as much the governments fault we are in the situation we are in, as it is the Railroads.